

CAUSES AND EFFECTS OF POOR COMMUNICATION IN CONSTRUCTION  
PROJECTS

YASER MOHAMMED RAGEH GAMIL

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Dedicated to my loving parents and siblings for their unconditional support and prayers. It is also dedicated to my beloved wife (Ahlam), son (Ammar), and daughter (Leen) for their patience, endurance, and support.



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## ABSTRACT

Effective communication is an indispensable element to the successful completion of construction projects. However, maintaining a smooth and effective communication process is a challenge to construction practitioners. Many studies have been carried out on the communication in construction. Nevertheless, there is still lack of studies focusing exclusively on the identification of limited causes and effects of poor communication in the construction projects. Hence, this study is not only intended to entirely identify and assess the causes and effects of poor communication but also to establish the relationships between them. The study was conducted using mix method approaches where the qualitative approach was carried out using exploratory interviews with ten selected construction experts to gain insights on the issues of poor communication in Malaysian construction. The information gathered from interviews were analysed using thematic content analysis. In the quantitative approach, a questionnaire survey was used to collect data from 262 respondents to assess the cause and effect factors. The questionnaire was designed based on the causes and effects identified from the literature and the exploratory interview which simultaneously resulted in identifying 43 causes and 23 effects. The collected data were analysed using statistical univariate and multivariate approaches. The univariate analysis adopted average index score to rank the significance level of the factors and found five most significant causal factors which are *lack of communication system and platform, improper communication channel, lack of appropriate communication medium, poor project information management, and lack of formal execution of communication*. While the five most severe effects of poor communication are *information overlapping, time overrun, cost overrun, dispute, and high stress in the workplace*. The collected data were further used to develop a structural relationship model for the causes and effects using Smart-PLS. The model was assessed and validated for both measurement and structural components. The model addressed the relationships between causes and effects which then verified by construction experts. The structural equation model with the outcome from exploratory interviews were combined to produce a framework of poor communication causes and effects. The framework also introduced the mitigation measures of poor communication. The findings of this research are helpful to accommodate the need for construction practitioners and stakeholders to understand the most significant causes, most severe effects, and offered mitigation measures of poor communication.

## ABSTRAK

Komunikasi berkesan adalah elemen penting untuk penyiapan projek pembinaan yang berjaya. Di samping itu, mengekalkan kelancaran dan keberkesanan proses komunikasi adalah cabaran kepada pengamal pembinaan. Banyak kajian telah dijalankan terhadap isu komunikasi dalam pembinaan berkaitan dengan konsep, teknologi, perantara dan cabaran. Walau bagaimanapun, masih terdapat kekurangan kajian yang menumpukan khusus terhadap pengenalanpastian terhadap punca dan kesan komunikasi yang lemah dalam industri pembinaan. Oleh itu, kajian ini bukan sahaja bertujuan untuk mengenalpasti dan menilai punca dan kesan faktor komunikasi yang lemah dan untuk mewujudkan perkaitannya. Kajian ini dijalankan menggunakan pendekatan kaedah campuran di mana pendekatan kualitatif dijalankan menggunakan temubual penyiasatan dengan 10 pakar pembinaan yang terpilih untuk mendapatkan pandangan terhadap isu komunikasi yang lemah dalam pembinaan di Malaysia. Maklumat yang diperolehi daripada temubual di analisis menggunakan pendekatan tematik. Melalui pendekatan kualitatif, kaji selidik digunakan untuk mengumpul data daripada 262 responden untuk menilai faktor punca dan kesan. Soal selidik direkabentuk berdasarkan punca dan kesan dikenali dari literatur dan temubual penyiasatan di mana pada masa yang mengenalpasti 43 punca dan 23 kesan. Data yang dikumpulkan di analisis menggunakan pendekatan statistik univariat dan multivariat. Analisis univariat menggunakan skor indeks purata untuk menentukan kedudukan tahap perkaitan bagi faktor dan mendapati 5 faktor paling berkaitan iaitu platform dan sistem komunikasi yang lemah, saluran komunikasi yang tidak sesuai, perantara komunikasi bersesuaian yang lemah, pengurusan maklumat projek yang lemah, dan pelaksanaan formal komunikasi yang lemah. Sementara itu, 5 kesan yang paling teruk komunikasi yang lemah ialah pertindihan maklumat, masa berlebihan, kos berlebihan, pertelingkahan, dan tekanan di tempat kerja. Data yang dikumpulkan digunakan dengan lebih lanjut untuk membangunkan model hubungan berstruktur di antara punca dan kesan menggunakan perisian Smart-PLS. Model ini dinilai dan disahkan untuk kedua-dua komponen pengukuran dan yang mana dipertimbangkan model keseluruhannya adalah sesuai. Model yang merujuk kepada punca dan kesan tersebut kemudiannya disahkan pakar pembinaan. Dapatan kajian dapat membantu untuk mengenalpasti dan mengaitkan faktor punca dan kesan komunikasi yang lemah dalam kitaran projek pembinaan.

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## LIST OF SYMBOLS AND ABBREVIATIONS

|         |  |
|---------|--|
| PMI     | - Project Management Institute                         |
| BSI     | - British Standards Institution                        |
| PMBOK   | - Project Management Body of Knowledge                 |
| PWD     | - Public Works Departments                             |
| CIDB    | - Construction Industry Development Board, Malaysia    |
| CI      | - Construction Industry                                |
| GDP     | - Gross Domestic Product                               |
| IBS     | - Industrialized Building System                       |
| PLS-SEM | - Partial Least Square -Structural Equation Modeling   |
| IMS     | - Information Management System                        |
| AI      | - Average Index  |
| BIM     | - Building Information Modelling                       |
| ICT     | - Information Communication Technology                 |
| UTHM    | - Universiti Tun Hussein Onn Malaysia                  |
| BEM     | - Board of Engineers                                   |
| P.Eng   | - Professional Engineer                                |
| CSV     | - Comma Separated Value                                |
| AVE     | - Average Variance Extracted                           |
| CR      | - Composite Reliability                                |
| $Q^2$   | - Predictive Relevancy                                 |
| $R^2$   | - Coefficient of Determination                         |
| CV- Red | - Cross Validated Redundancy                           |
| CV-Com  | - Cross Validated Communalities                        |
| PRSED   | - Public Relations Stakeholders' Engagement Department |



## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

#### 1.1 Research background

In recent years, the construction industry has expanded significantly and become one of the leading industrial sectors for the development of the society and economy. Also, it is one of the primary sectors for job generation (Isa *et al.*, 2013). Therefore, its growth is one of the criteria used for evaluating the progress level of a nation, and its sustainable growth is essential for the society and its potential expansion of urbanization (Dainty *et al.*, 2006).

Typically, the construction industry has unique characteristics in comparison with other industrial sectors where it is a dynamic, multifaceted, complex, multidisciplinary, and expandable (Jean, 1998; Anna & Lars-Erik, 2002; Senaratne & Ruwanpura, 2016). Consequently, these characters are accompanied with many challenges and problems such as poor quality of construction, poor performance, cost and time overruns, accidents, poor communication, project failure, and other issues (Alaghbari *et al.*, 2007; Abd El-Razek *et al.*, 2008).

Communication in the construction project lifecycle is indispensable component to the success of the projects because it involves in all the project stages of the project as a method of imparting and exchanging project information (Dainty *et al.*, 2006). For that reason, maintaining a proper process of communication and effective flow of information can be a significant challenge due to the vast amount of information and the number of parties engaging in a single project (Loosemore & Lee, 2002). On that account, poor communication develops and becomes as a global phenomenon in construction projects (Zulch, 2012). It is also considered as one of

the hindrances to maintaining a steady execution process and effective project delivery (Senaratne & Ruwanpura, 2016).

Poor communication is the term used to describe the unsuccessful delivery of project information, the wrong selection of channelling, and improper timing of information distribution (Dainty *et al.*, 2006). In a corresponding finding, a report released by the Project Management Institute (PMI) (2013) revealed that more than half of all project budget risk is due to ineffective communications, improper channelling, and inaccurate time management of information dissemination. The report further elaborated, inferior and substandard communications is the primary cause of project failure.

Furthermore, the British Standards Institution (BSI) (2003) estimated the cost required to correct defects due to ineffective communication of project information is valued approximately £20 billion annually in the United Kingdom (UK) construction industry. It also emphasized that for better communication and sharing information between designers, engineers, and contractors would likely to be essential to complete the project on time and budget.

Poor communication in the construction workplace leads to many other negative impacts. Frustration, friction, tense environment, and demotivation are among the negative impacts of poor communication (Zulch, 2012). These issues result in poor productivity and efficiency whereby employees tend to overreact upon any matter. Hence, effective communication is necessary to produce more understandable workplace and facilitate the interaction between employees to ensure a successful completion of the project.

Regarding the situation of Malaysian construction industry, it has a multicultural and multilingual society where different languages are used and different interpretations are developed during project information exchange (Kuang *et al.*, 2010). These characteristics of the industry requires in depth investigation on the status of communication, its process, and issues. Furthermore, the causes and effects of poor communication in construction industry needs to be identified and assessed to further avoid poor communication and produce smooth project implementation. Therefore, more effort and research are required to investigate the issue of communication in the construction industry especially on identifying the causes and effects of poor communication to construction projects success which is

expected to benefit the construction community to understand the issue of poor communication in their respective organizations.

## 1.2 Problem statement

Construction industry is a complex, diversified, and fragmented in nature whereby it is distributed over a large area, involves many parties, and the projects comprises of many activities and sub-activities (Dainty *et al.*, 2006). Hence, communication exhibits complexity and it is not performed in a timely and effective method (Pérez, 2017). Additionally, the project information is not delivered on a proper channelling, satisfying accuracy, and lacks of appropriate generation, inefficient storage and distribution (Crowe, 2005; Fichet & Giraud, 2007). Poor communication also appears in internal and external communication of the companies and seriously hampered the overall project performance (Xie *et al.*, 2010).

Furthermore, poor and ineffective communication is attributed directly or indirectly to cause many challenges to the construction projects such as cost and time overruns, poor quality, lack of safety, rework, dispute among parties, improper coordination between project parties, and failure of the projects (Alaghbari *et al.*, 2007; Memon & Ismail, 2014; Brandt, 2017). Hence, parties engaged in construction projects require an effective communication to disseminate information especially during the construction stage.

According to the annual report produced by PMI (2013), ineffective communication among relevant parties contributes to 56% of the total risk of a project cost overrun. On account of that, exploring the issue of communication in the construction industry can be a massive hurdle because a considerable amount of technical and non-technical information encompasses in a single project (Loosemore & Lee, 2002; Brandt, 2017).

Correspondingly, poor communication leads to many other undesirable and negative consequences such as demotivation among project practitioners, poor productivity, poor performance, and suspension of the project (Zulch, 2012). A case study on the Danish construction companies found that 61% of errors in construction projects were made due to lack of communication and cooperation (Arnorsson, 2012). Also, Dainty *et al.* (2006) emphasized that poor communication is the root

cause of dispute and failure of projects. Furthermore, Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBK) highlighted that a breakdown in communication leads to interruption of work processes, monitoring, poor cost management, and improper information management and exchange (PMBK, 2001).

Poor communication also results in unfavourable outcomes which include frustration, confusion, discouragement, and agitated environment wherein construction parties are not motivated to be productive and inspired to collaborate amongst them (Henderson *et al.*, 2016; Senaratne & Ruwanpura, 2016). Apart from that, a study by Hon *et al.* (2015) reported that nearly 30% of migrant workers are likely to have work-related injuries due to language barrier and miscommunication of health and safety procedures. Furthermore, Liao *et al.* (2014) introduces the importance of communication in generating a safe workplace in the concept of management of safety communication. In a different aspect, Gavilan & Bernold (1994) found that improper communication among construction stakeholders is a significant reason to cause waste generation in the construction industry in the form of rework and rehabilitation due to erroneous delivery of technical information.

Conventional methods of communication such as emails, progress meetings, progress reports are associated with many drawbacks. Of these drawbacks, project information is not delivered on time which lead to delay in decision making and improper selection of channels leads to delay of the project (Bryde *et al.*, 2013). Also, the rising of new technology such as video conferencing, communication platforms, and mobile applications are accompanied with challenges in term of the requirement of new methods and process to be compatible with the advancement of technology (Eastman *et al.*, 2011). The methods and process have to be in conformance with the new advanced technology (Bryde *et al.*, 2013).

Several studies on the communication research in the construction industry have discovered the issue of poor communication from different standpoints, for instance, an investigation by Cheng (2001) focused on the effects of having various skill levels to cause communication difficulties among the project team, and Thorpe & Mead (2001) discussed the methods of communication in construction projects. Besides that, Chen (2008) investigated the mechanism of information retrieval and transfer on construction sites. In a different perspective, Onyegiri, Nwachukwu & Jamiike (2011) focused on the implementation of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in the construction industry.

In respect to the communication during project stages, Md-Ulang (2012) explored the communication mechanism during the design stage, and Tipili *et al.* (2014) investigated the issue of communication during the execution stage. Also, Liu (2009) identified the critical factors for managing project communication during the execution stage. Moreover, Hassan & Rahman (2018) investigated the role of virtual design as a new method to improve communication during the bidding stage. Turley (2010) studied the frequency of communication by the managers. Zulch (2012) and Bandulahewa (2015) focused on managerial communication in term of mechanism and methods. On the other hand, Loosemore & Lee (2002) focused on ethnic minorities in construction and found that language and cultural diversity can cause poor communication. In addition to that, Debs (2016) studied the media influence on construction industry communication and focused on channelling and face-to-face communication.

In regards to modelling communication, a study by Campbell & Russo (2003) developed a model of social construction of mobile telephone and focused on the influence of mobile use within the personal communication. Another study by Cheng *et al* (2001) discovered a network model communication in the construction industry. However, the present models didn't cover the poor communication causes and effects and their relationships.

Despite the studies mentioned before, the issue of poor communication in the term of unsuccessful exchange of project information in the construction project still lacks of studies because researches in the subject of poor communication were limited to process, methods, and concepts and there has been no study reported on the identification and assessment of cause and effect factors of poor communication in the construction industry. Hence, this study intends not only to identify and assess the cause and effect factors, but also to establish the relationships model between the factors using advanced multivariate analysis.

### 1.3 Research questions

There have been numerous studies on the area of communication in construction industry. However, those studies are not explicit to fully cover the problem of poor communication and many questions are yet to be answered. Therefore, it is

imperative to thoroughly investigate, identify and study the poor communication in construction industry. Four questions arose from the research problem which are stated as follows:

- i. What are the issues and challenges of communication in construction industry and the mitigation measures of poor communication?
- ii. What are the causes and effects of poor communication in construction industry?
- iii. What are the dominant causes and effects of poor communication in construction industry?
- iv. How significant is the relationship between causes and effects of poor communication in construction industry?

#### **1.4 Research aim and objectives**

The main aim of this research is to establish the relationships between cause and effect factors of poor communication in the construction projects. To accomplish this aim, several objectives are introduced, which include:

- i. To explore the communication in construction projects and identify the cause and effect factors of poor communication in the construction projects.
- ii. To determine the dominant cause and effect factors of poor communication.
- iii. To develop a relationship model of cause and effect factors of poor communication.
- iv. To propose a framework of poor communication causes and effects relationships and also proposing mitigation measures of poor communication.

#### **1.5 Research hypothesis**

To achieve the objectives mentioned previously, this study hypothesized that several cause factors triggered to the occurrence of the poor communication and as consequence of the issue several effect factors have resulted. Two hypotheses are proposed for the research which are null and alternative:



- i. *Null Hypothesis ( $H_0$ ):* There is no statistically significant relationship between causes and effects to poor communication in construction projects.
- ii. *Alternative hypothesis ( $H_a$ ):* There is a statistically significant relationship between causes and effects of poor communication in construction projects whereby causes take the lead to negative effects.

## 1.6 Scope of the research

This is an applied research which aims to solve and analyse a prevailing communication issues in the construction projects. The research focused on the identification and assessment of causes and effects of poor communication and limits its scope to the following extents:

- i. Investigating communication issues in the context of the Malaysian construction industry throughout peninsular Malaysia.
- ii. The data are collected using a mix method approach which includes both qualitative and quantitative approaches through exploratory interviews and questionnaire surveys.
- iii. Targeted respondents are Malaysian construction experts for interviews who are working in the managerial level or in a senior position. However, for questionnaire survey, the targeted respondents are company directors, project managers, architects, project engineers, site engineers, and quantity surveyors who work in consultancies and contracting firms which are registered under the Construction Industry Development Board (CIDB) Malaysia.
- iv. The data collected is analysed using, thematic content analysis for qualitative and univariate and multivariate for quantitative analysis with the aid of statistical software including OTRANSCRIBE, Microsoft Excel, SPSS, and Smart-PLS. Smart-PLS is used to develop the structural relationship model. The model is then verified by engaging construction experts.

## 1.7 Research conceptual framework

The conceptual framework introduced a guideline of the research. Figure 1.1 shows the basic conceptual framework of the research.

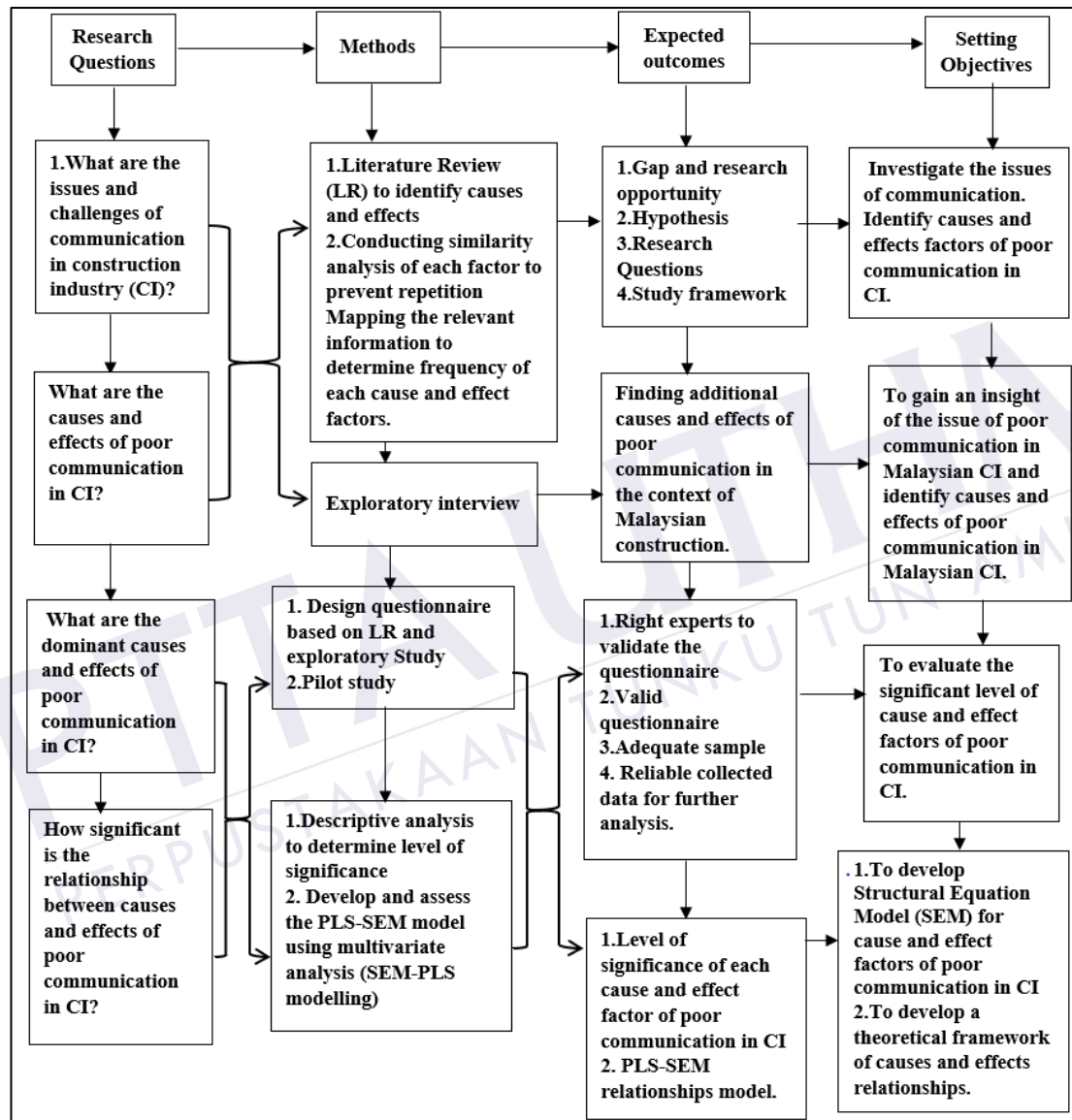


Figure 1.1: Conceptual framework

Figure 1.1 illustrates the research conceptual framework which represents the study synthesis starting with literature, methods, and results analysis. The conceptual framework is designed to answer the specified research questions by implying certain methods that can result in achieving the designated objectives.



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